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ABSTRACT

This overview of substitute teaching in K-12 schools looks at why substitutes are needed, factors that attract individuals to the work, and what school administrators can do to facilitate good substitute teaching. While schools continue to utilize substitutes for traditional reasons such as personal or family illness or emergency, the school reform movement of the mid-1980s has involved classroom teachers in a variety of nontraditional, noninstructional activities. In addition, changes in federal or state labor laws may result in teachers being eligible for more personal and sick leave. Individuals work as substitute teachers to earn income, but primarily to gain experience and make contacts that may lead to permanent, full-time teaching positions. To structure good substitute teacher programs and create a dependable cadre of replacement teachers, school administrators can hire permanent, full-time substitutes, institute graduated pay scales, offer inservice training, provide feedback, improve recruitment procedures, develop and provide a substitute teacher's handbook on school rules and policies, see that substitutes receive improved lesson plans, and appoint a district substitute teacher coordinator. (Contains 10 references.) (LL)

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NOT JUST A WARM BODY: CHANGING IMAGES OF THE SUBSTITUTE TEACHER

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by

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Not Just a Warm Body: Changing Images of the Substitute Teacher

Ismat Abdal-Haqq

Ask members of the K-12 school community how they regard substitute teachers and, depending on whether the informant is an educator or a student, you might get some of the following answers: baby-sitter, fair-game, stop-gap, object of pity, warm body. The lot of substitute teachers is generally not a happy one (Nidds & McGerald, 1994). For the most part, they tend to be treated as a marginal member of the education community (Ostapczuk, 1994; Wyld, 1995). Rarely do students, teachers, or administrators regard substitutes as full professionals who meet accepted standards of practice. While often considering themselves to be effective instructors, substitutes frequently do not see themselves as professionals (Billman, 1994; Ostapczuk, 1994).

Some would say that substitutes should receive combat pay rather than the modest compensation typically meted out to them. Research and anecdotal reports cite classroom management as the greatest challenge faced by substitutes (Aceto, 1995; Galvez-Martin, 1997; Nidds & McGerald, 1994; Ostapczuk, 1994). Children frequently view the substitute's entry as a signal to misbehave. Other problems include incomplete or missing lesson plans; unfamiliarity with school or district policies; and the perception by students, parents, and colleagues that substitutes are merely baby sitters or pinch-hitters—the "warm body stereotype" (Wyld, 1995, p. 302). Lamentation can also be heard from employers who commonly complain that these replacement teachers are not well-qualified, lacking both pedagogical and classroom management skills (Ostapczuk, 1994).

Problems typically faced by substitutes or those who hire them are not new. The same problems were documented 50 years ago (Ostapczuk, 1994), and solutions appear to be as elusive as ever. Findings from a study by St. Michel (1995) suggest that problems associated with substitute teacher programs result from nonmanagement more so than mismanagement. These findings echo a theme found in Ostapczuk's (1994) review of the literature on substitutes, which noted the low priority school districts traditionally place on substitute teacher development.

This Digest provides an overview of substitute teaching in K-12 schools. It looks at why substitutes are needed, factors that attract individuals to the work, and what school administrators can do to facilitate good substitute teaching.

Why do schools utilize substitutes?

American students, over the course of their K-12 studies, may have replacement teachers for an estimated 5-10% of their classroom time (Billman, 1994; Nidds & McGerald, 1994; Ostapczuk, 1994). Wyld (1995) notes that on any given school day, up to 10% of the nation's classrooms have substitute teachers. Traditionally, teacher absenteeism has occurred for the same reasons that employees in other fields are absent—e.g., personal or family illness or emergency, jury duty, professional development activities, short-term military service. Wyld (1995) indicates that teacher absenteeism, for these and other reasons, is on the rise.

More recently, widespread school restructuring, school-based management, and redefinitions of teacher work that emerged from the school reform movement of the mid-1980s have involved classroom teachers in a variety of nontraditional, noninstructional activities, such as curriculum design, mentoring novice and preservice teachers, conducting action research, and working on collaborative teams with peers and college faculty. Employing substitutes is one method of covering the classes of teachers who participate in such activities during the school day (Abdal-Haqq, 1996).

Collective bargaining and changes in federal or state labor laws may also result in teachers being eligible for more personal and sick leave, compelling schools to find substitutes for more days (Billman, 1994). In discussing the impact on schools of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), signed into law by President Clinton in 1993, Wyld (1995) indicates that the most profound administrative and instructional effects of FMLA will occur in the role of substitute teachers who replace teachers taking intermittent or block leave. This legislation may not alter the total amount of leave that teachers take, but it is likely to affect the increments in which both paid and unpaid intermittent leave is taken and the length of block leave. Consequently, principals may be faced with the challenge of finding substitutes willing to work for 1 or 2 hours. The complex provisions of FMLA may also produce longer teacher absences at the end of semesters, resulting in more use of long-term substitutes. Thus, FMLA has implications for the ways in which administrators utilize substitutes, the composition of the substitute pool, recruitment, and compensation.

Why do people work as substitutes?

Individuals substitute to earn income (Aceto, 1995; Snyder, 1995), but they are unlikely to do so in order to become rich. A 1989 study found the average per diem compensation for substitutes to be $45 to $55, depending upon locale, ranging from a high of $118 to a low of $21 (Wyld, 1995).

A primary reason for substituting is to gain experience and make contacts that may lead to permanent, full-time teaching positions (Midds & McGerald, 1994; Wyld, 1995). Some administrators only hire as permanent teachers those who have substitute experience (Snyder, 1995).

Snyder (1995) cites advantages and disadvantages to substituting, paarticularly for preservice teacher education students. Advantages include: gaining experience, comparing and contrasting different schools, networking, learning about job vacancies, learning about school and district policies, and having a flexible work schedule. Disadvantagaes include: pay scales below what full-time teachers receive; generally, no fringe benefits; no organized advocacy representation to improve working conditions and compensation; less than cordial reception in some schools; having to "fly by the seat of your pants" and adapt quickly to different school conditions and philosophies; and lack of instructional continuity.

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Certified and experienced teachers sometimes opt for substituting because they prefer the flexibility and lesser time demands (Wyld, 1995). Wyld also points out that studies have shown that relatively few individuals work as substitutes more than a year, and even fewer make a career of it. Consequently, the composition of the substitute pool constantly shifts, necessitating a continual need to replenish the supply of qualified individuals.

What can school administrators do to structure good substitute teacher programs?

Literature on substitutes is not particularly abundant (Nidds & McGerald, 1994). According to Ostapczuk (1994) and Galvez-Martin (1997), little of what has been written has been subjected to the sort of rigorous statistical evaluation that might inform and guide substitute teacher development or utilization.

Qualifications for substitutes vary considerably among school districts. Credentials may include teacher certification, criminal background checks, college transcripts, health certificates, and evidence of first aid training (Snyder, 1995). Certification is not required in most states and districts; frequently a high school diploma is the sole academic credential needed (Wyld, 1995).

Wyld (1995) indicates that school administrators have basically three sources of experienced substitute teachers. In intermittent or short-term leave situations, working principals and other administrators can fill in. A second source of experienced teachers is former or retired teachers. However, former teachers who have been conditioned to the warm body stereotype may not find such a "demotion" attractive unless appealing incentives are offered. The third source cited by Wyld is the current substitute pool. By employing the better substitutes more frequently, administrators can provide opportunities for these promising individuals to gain additional experience and increase their capacity to take on the more critical long-term assignments.

Two approaches to creating a dependable cadre of experienced replacement teachers are hiring permanent, full-time substitutes and instituting a graduated substitute pay scale. With the first approach, the substitute is placed on the district payroll (Nidds & McGerald, 1994; Wyld, 1995). When not needed to fill in for absent teachers, these individuals may perform other school work, such as assisting with curriculum development. Graduated pay scale arrangements offer monetary incentives to encourage substitutes to work more and/or take on longer-term assignments. After meeting a minimum requirement (e.g., 25 days in a school year), the base per diem pay increases (Wyld, 1995).

In addition to implementing policies that increase experience among a core group of substitutes, administrators may also increase substitute expertise by offering inservice training (Nidds & McGerald, 1994; Ostapczuk, 1994). Many schools engaged in restructuring or other reform initiatives have found that preservice students who have extended on-site field work or internships can be cost-effective, short-term replacements for teachers who need time for noninstructional professional work (Abdal-Haqq, 1996).

Ostapczuk (1994) gleaned several recommendations for structuring good substitute programs: (1) improve collaboration between the substitute teacher and school district, (2) evaluate and provide feedback to substitutes, (3) improve recruitment procedures, (4) develop and provide a substitute teacher's handbook on school rules and policies, (5) clarify the substitute's role and make expectations clear, (6) provide specific inservice training on classroom management, (7) improve the lesson plans substitutes receive, and (8) appoint a district substitute coordinator. Additional recommendations cited by St. Michel (1995) include: (1) improve employment benefits; (2) treat substitutes as professionals; and (3) maintain an up-to-date, comprehensive database of all substitutes in the district.

There are both practical and moral reasons to develop sound substitute teacher programs. Liability is one practical concern for schools, administrators, and substitute's themselves. Cotten (1995) points out that case law holds the substitute, principal, and school district to the same standard of care as it does regular teachers, and each is liable for acts of negligence. As stewards of children in their care, teachers, administrators, and districts have a moral obligation, as well as a statutory and contractual one, to ensure that the best interests of students guide policy and practice. Thus, it is only fitting that the current movement to elevate standards of practice in schools apply to this traditionally neglected sector of the education community.

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